

## An Interview with K. S. Sivakumaran on Aspects of Culture in Sri Lanka

Le Roy Robinson

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A Tamil Hindu, he was born in Batticaloa, the capital town of the Eastern Province, on October 1, 1936.

He had his early education from 1947 to 1953 in Batticaloa at St. Michael's College, then managed by North American Jesuits. He then attended St. Joseph's College, Colombo, until 1958.

In 1960 Sivakumaran began his career as a journalist working for a trade journal, *Industry*, now defunct. From 1961 to 1969 he was a translator of Tamil for the Local Government Service Commission.

In 1966 he was selected as a relief announcer in Tamil for the commercial service of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation. In 1969 he joined the S. L. B. C. in a permanent capacity as a Tamil translator in the News Division. He was later appointed an assistant editor and subsequently held the post of Duty Editor of the S. L. B. C.'s Tamil News until 1979.

In 1974 Sivakumaran published his *Tamil Writing in Sri Lanka*.

In 1979 he joined the United States Information Service, Colombo, handling work in English as an assistant to the Information Officer.

In 1980 he obtained his Bachelor of Arts from the University of Peradeniya, where, as an external candidate, he majored in English, Tamil

and Western Classical Culture.

In 1982 Sivakumaran published *Sivakumaran Kathaihal*, a collection of his short stories in Tamil previously published in newspapers.

His *Eelaththu Thamil Navagal* (1956–1981), a collection of his reviews on Sri Lankan Tamil novels will soon be published.

Sivakumaran is a member of the English Panel of the Arts Council of Sri Lanka under the Ministry of Cultural Affairs.

He is one of the three vice presidents of the Sri Lanka chapter of P. E. N.\*

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ROBINSON: As a cultural journalist, have you written much about film in Sri Lanka?

SIVAKUMARAN: Yes, of course. I'm very interested in films. I've served as member of the jury for local film festivals. I've a certificate from a workshop sponsored by the State Film Corporation and conducted in Sinhala for film script writers. I write and broadcast film reviews in both English and Tamil, I was one of the founding members of the Film Critics and Journalists Association. That's now defunct. But I am a committee member of the newly formed Sri Lanka Film Critics Association.

ROBINSON: Then you often interview local movie stars?

SIVAKUMARAN: Yes. Not so long ago, for example, I interviewed the actor Sillayoor Selvarajan. In local Tamil cultural circles he's popularly known as Pal Kalai Vendhar, the master of multi-faceted arts. He recently played an important role in an English film produc-

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\*This is the third part of an interview the first part of which was published in Bulletin of the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Humanities, Vol. 28, No.2 (January 1988) and the second in Keiei to Keizai, Vol. 68, No. 4 (March 1989).

ed here. "Sacrifice". Directed by David Keith. A son of former Ethiopian leader Haile Selassie was also in the cast. Soloro Selassie. Selvarajan also appeared in the B. B. C. TV film "Lord Mountbatten" and acquired international notice. He played the part of a Muslim friend of Mahatma Gandhi. He's performed in local Sinhalese films too. "Aadarae Katheawak" (A Love Story) and "Sathiyakiriya" (Fruits of Good Behavior) are two that come to mind. In "Aadarae" his own son Dileepan played the role of the hero. Selvarajan wrote the the Tamil sections of the script himself. His wife Kamalini is an actress, and they played together in "Komaligal" (Jokers), a Tamil film produced here. Kamalini is a graduate in Fine Arts. She has a weekly radio program on the arts. She broadcasts in Tamil. I participate in this program quite often. She writes short stories in Tamil too. You asked me before about local Tamil music, so let me add that Selvarajan is also a song writer. His song "Kanmani Aadava" (Come Dance with Me, My Love) was used in a film, a Tamil film, "Nirmala", and became quite popular. Nirmala is the name of the heroine. Selvarajan's quite versatile. That's why he's called Pal Kalai Vendhar. He's a poet, a literary critic, a copy writer, a broadcaster. He started out as a journalist. He's also produced a large number of documentary films. He's also produced five children!

ROBINSON: Let me warn you that we'll have to go into children's literature too, but first who's one of the more famous Tamil women film actresses in Sri Lanka?

SIVAKUMARAN: I'd like to mention Helen Kumari. Her name comes quickly to mind because she was recently honored by the Young Men's Tamil Cultural Organization here for her contribution to the local cultural scene via the Tamil language. She's performed on the

stage as well. She began acting as a child. She's married to an actor. Rajasekeran. She played the role of the heroine in the comedy "Eamalikal" (The Deceived Ones) and in two sentimental melodramatic films, "Nenjukku Neethi" (Justice for the Heart) and "Thentralum Puyalum" (The Breeze and the Storm). All locally produced Tamil films. She's an Oriental dancer too and was the dance director on several Sinhala films. She choreographed light dances.

ROBINSON: Is there much interest in movies among Tamil fiction writers in Sri Lanka?

SIVAKUMARAN: Well, we do have, or did have, a writer like Bala Mahendran. He wrote short stories in Tamil. Experimental stories — he handled sex themes that were taboo in the 1960s. And he published a Tamil literary magazine, a monthly, "Thenaruvi". That's Stream of Honey. At the time — in the mid-1960s — he was a draftsman in the Survey Department. He'd been educated at St. Michael's College in Batticaloa and at Jaffna College in Vadukodai. His father was a teacher of mathematics. But to get to the point of your question, he's now a film maker in Tamilnadu. He lives in Madras. He recently did a movie called "Veedu" (Home). He wrote the original story and the screen play and did the photography and edited it as well.

Some years ago a Tamil novelist here who writes under the name of Chempian Chelvan — his real name is A. Rajagopal — did a film script adapted from a Tamil novel by a friend of his, Sengai Aaliyan, a civil servant who is one of our prolific local novelists. "Vaadai Kattu" (Northerly Winds) was one of the important Tamil films of the time. It's about a love affair, a love triangle, in a fishing village.

ROBINSON: Did Bala Mahendran move to Madras for political reasons?

SIVAKUMARAN: No, I'd say professional reasons. You see, he'd studied film making at the Film Institute at Pune. In India. In case you didn't know, the Pune Film Institute is a cinema center that is shaping the quality of Indian cinema. Mahendran — he's called Balu Mahendra in India — had already been a professional photographer here, and in India he first became known as a photographer for the movies. A cinematographer, a film cameraman. Anyway, he'd come back to Sri Lanka with high hopes, but he was disappointed here professionally and returned to India.

ROBINSON: What disappointed him?

SIVAKUMARAN: He was disappointed that local film producers — both Sinhalese and Tamils — did not make much use of his talent even as a cameraman. There was an anti-South Indian film mood in Sri Lanka then. Even now the Sinhala critics call South Indian Tamil films "trash" without realizing these films have come of age. It was alright condemning the earlier films in the initial stages of the development of the "truly Sinhala cinema" but to continue with the same usage leaves room to suspect racial undertones.

ROBINSON: What is "Veedu" about?

SIVAKUMARAN: It revolves around the problem of building a house. It's set in Madras. A lower middle class woman lives in a rented place. She's an average woman, a working woman, the breadwinner of her family.

ROBINSON: Offhand, this doesn't seem a subject for drama.

SIVAKUMARAN: I haven't seen "Veedu" yet — yes, it does seem low key — but Professor Karthigesu Sivathamby — we referred to him before — has seen it, and he compares it with Ozu's "Tokyo Story" and Satyajit Rai's "Mahanagar". Mahendran himself has said he threw all commercial compromises into the air to create the film.

There are no songs or dances. Songs and dances are customary in Tamil films. There are fewer than usual spoken sequences. That is, less dialogue. The film received an Indian National Film Award as the best Tamil film produced in Tamilnadu.

ROBINSON: Are there any women film directors or producers in Sri Lanka's Tamil communities?

SIVAKUMARAN: No, none.

ROBINSON: Then, let's go back to Chempian Chelvan. What kind of writing does he do?

SIVAKUMARAN: He's a critic. He's written poetry and drama and, as I say, fiction. He's edited a few literary magazines and a few anthologies. Incidentally, he's a geography teacher. In Jaffna.

ROBINSON: What's one of his novels?

SIVAKUMARAN: *Neruppu Mallikai*. I mentioned the Tamil literary magazine "Mallikai" before. To repeat, Mallikai means jasmine, and Neruppu Mallikai means red colored jasmine flower. It's what I call a Jaffna novel. It deals with a slice of life in Jaffna. In 1978 it won a prize in a competition sponsored by the Tamil daily paper Viraker-sari, which used to publish books, as the best regional novel depicting aspects of life in the peninsula. It's a kind of social novel showing the residue of the feudal system still operating in some parts of the north. But the accent seems to be on sex.

A petty businessman is trying his best to outrage the modesty of a widowed woman, to put it euphemistically. Her husband died prematurely. She has a daughter and a son. But because she's "low caste" her dead husband's family do not help her in any way. To make a living, she opens a boutique. In local usage, I think you know, boutique means a small shop of any kind not necessarily a shop specializing in women's clothing. In this case a boutique selling

hoppers baked from rice flour. The mudalali I mentioned before, the businessman, is “high caste”. He’s already carrying on an illicit affair with another man’s wife, but he wants to conquer the widow also. But she’s true to her Tamil tradition and keeps him at bay. So he commits an act of arson and she burns to death in the fire he sets. As for the title, in the widow’s compound there’s a neruppu mallikai, a jasmine tree with red flowers. Her wrath and curses are symbolized in the burnt tree’s ashes. There’s a suggestion that people like the businessman who commit such murderous acts should be tried and condemned.

I liked the novel. It touches upon social realities — the problem of marriages determined by fat dowries, the problem of existence without adequate income, the problem of relations between the sexes, the problem of politics. All these are touched upon in the novel but they’re not analyzed. So to me there’s some kind of confusion. It’s not one of the best Jaffna novels written in Tamil here, but it’s a fairly important work by a local writer. We have many Jaffna novels here, most fair, a few very good.

ROBINSON: Mallikai reminds me of another Tamil literary magazine that you mentioned before. The Wave.

SIVAKUMARAN: Yes, “Alai” It’s edited by Jesurasa. In the late 1970s he published a book of his own short stories. *Tholaivum Iruppum Enaya Kathaikalum*. The Distance, the Being, and other stories. Most of them introduce a theme of alienation — private agony — and they’re candid subjective observations of a narrator who’s an outsider trying hard to strike a balance with the environment he lives in. You’ve visited the University of Peradeniya, and one of Jesurasa’s settings is there. The other is the fishing village area of Gurunagar in Jaffna.

ROBINSON: Who is this outsider who tells the stories?

SIVAKUMARAN: He's an educated youth from Gurunagar, but he lives in Colombo — and Kandy — where he works for the Postal Department. He's a sensitive young man. He enjoys reading, seeing artistic films. He wants to rise above his environment. He wants to live as honestly as possible. He has problems of unrequited love, maladjustment. But he overcomes pessimism and becomes skeptical and rational. I think he speaks for Jesurasa himself who has — or had — an inclination toward flirting with existensialism. Anyway, as Shanmugan Sivalingam — he's a sensitive poet and critic himself — says in his foreword, the outlook is based on practical social, political, psychological and philosophical concepts.

ROBINSON: Let's come back to short stories later. But to go back to India, so to speak, several people in Sri Lanka have mentioned visiting India. Have you ever gone to India?

SIVAKUMARAN: Yes, I've made five trips. I've been to New Delhi, Bombay, Agra, Thirupathy, Bangalore, Madras. My last trip lasted one month. And, back to film, in Madras I attended a two-day German film festival at the German Cultural Institute. Thanks to the German Cultural Institute in Colombo. And I also saw a couple of Tamil films and a Malayalam film, all three made in India.

ROBINSON: Again I won't question you about the details, but what was your impression of Tamilandu, say?

SIVAKUMARAN: Well, let me put it this way — as a Tamilian I felt proud to be in Tamilnadu. The Tamil consciousness reigns supreme there. Having lived in a cosmopolitan city like Colombo for over thirty years — most Sri Lankas are more "westernized" than most people in India — I'm used to the lack of an exclusively Tamil context. But in Tamilnadu — in Madras and other places — I could feel a



cultural atmosphere springing from a Dravidian foundation. On the other hand, I also experienced a sense of degradation. Let me explain this. Before I quoted to you the old Tamil saying *Yathum Oore Yavarum Kealir*. Any country is my country and all the people are my relations. In Tamilnadu that saying seems to have been forgotten. A strong tendency toward parochialism was evident to me. There's a lot of corruption, charlatanism and philistinism masquerading in the name of more than 2500 years of Dravidian culture. I mean that while the "Brahmins", who are educated, think that they're superior to the illiterate masses, the non-Brahmins think that since they belong to the Dravidian race, the Aryan Brahmins are exploitive. But most Brahmins in the South are Dravidians themselves. Anyway, as for India as a whole, it's a nation of many contradictions. It's a disintegrating conglomeration of different national identities grouped together artificially.

ROBINSON: Before we get too far afield, let's go back to the local music scene — and women. You referred before to Arunthathy Sri Ranganathan, a music controller at Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation.

SIVAKUMARAN: Yes. As I said in passing, she's interested in African as well as Oriental music and she has an album she recorded in Nigeria with musicians from there. Is this too far afield? She also took part in a music festival in Lusaka, Zambia, sponsored by the Zambia Tamil Arts and Cultural Association. You're in an economics faculty, so you may be interested to know that she graduated from the University of Sri Lanka with honors in economics. She hails from a talented family. One of her sisters, Ambika Thamotheram, is a vocalist. Another, Jayalakshmi Kandiah, is a dance teacher who produces ballets. She's presently the Director

of Music and Dance at the Indian Fine Arts Center in Singapore. Arunthathy herself plays veena and sings. She's produced several Tamil music cassettes. She's performed in Singapore, Malaysia, the U. K., the U. S. A., Zimbabwe, Botswana — and, of course, Nigeria and Zambia. She has a certificate for the teaching of Carnatic music — South Indian classical music — and she's a visiting lecturer in music at the Open University, which Mr. Herath has told you a little about. She was recently awarded the title Gana Pooshana Thilagam by the Minister of Regional Development and Hindu Cultural Affairs. This title means "a star among accomplished musicians".

May I continue? I'd like to say something about her sister Jayalakshmi. A Sri Lankan Tamil holding such a prestigious position like hers in Singapore is a matter for local pride, you know. She used to operate her own school of music and dance and veena in Colombo. She's also taught in London. At the School of Oriental and African Studies there she produced a dance ballet, Ramayana. She also had a weekly program on B. B. C., for a while. Here in Sri Lanka she presented the first veena arangetram — arangetram means debut, in this case the first public dance performance after graduation — and she produced and choreographed the first Tamil ballet for the Rupavahini. Henry Jayasena has told you about Rupavahini. Also at one time Jayalakshmi was a visiting lecturer in fine arts at the University of Kelaniya. Her husband, Dr. A. Kandiah, is an academic. A lecturer in Tamil at Kelaniya University. He obtained his doctorate from London University. He's written a few books in Tamil. As for versatility again, Jayalakshmi's also a make up artist, a professional beautician.

ROBINSON: As long as we're touching on dance, is there one man you'd

like to mention?

SIVAKUMARAN: Yes, Sesha Palihakkara. He's a well-known Sinhala dancer. What's important is that he's set up a trust, a foundation you'd say, to keep our traditional arts alive and to help talented young artistes.

ROBINSON: What's the name of the foundation? In Colombo?

SIVAKUMARAN: The trust is called Gandharva Yatra. It operates a small school at Ugugoda. That's a village situated about 11 miles from Kandy, between Wategama and Panwila. It's in the foothills of the Hunnasgiriya Range. At an elevation of over 2,000 feet. Anyway, geography aside, some children in that area are already being trained there.

ROBINSON: Why was the school established in such an out of the way place?

SIVAKUMARAN: Well, Sesha Palihakkara's idea is that the simple life style of an agricultural community will gain an added dimension from the rehabilitation of traditional art forms. And vice versa!

ROBINSON: How do you translate Gandharva Yatra?

SIVAKUMARAN: Yatra refers to the search for truth and excellence. It also refers to movement. Gandharva stems from old legends — excerpts from Jataka stories, Hindu mythologies — about classical dancers, musicians and actors who performed at the heavenly courts of Indra, Brahma and Sakra.

ROBINSON: What traditional arts are the children being trained in?

SIVAKUMARAN: The curriculum is divided into two sections — folk and classical. Folk includes all the rituals, songs, dances and dramas from the Wap Magula to the Aluth Sahal Mangalya. Folk dramas like Sokari and Kolam, for example. Dr. Kariyawasam has told you about these. Certain old dances — Leekeli, Savarang, Pantheru,

Udekki — will be re-styled. The students who show special aptitude will then be given the classical training. Ragadari music, vocal and instrumental. Kandyan dance — you've seen Chitrasena's group doing that. And Low Country and Indian dance. Also contemporary dance. There'll also be instruction in the fundamentals of painting and sculpture. And, to refer to English again, the school intends to give instruction in English. Good instruction.

ROBINSON: As far as painting and sculpture are concerned, Donald Ramanayeka has described the local art scene. Who are some of the well known Sri Lankan Tamil artists?

SIVAKUMARAN: I'm glad you asked that question. The truth is, although there are many good Sri Lankan Tamil artists, painters and sculptors, they're largely unknown outside the Tamil communities. So, for example, a great artist like A. Marku remains unknown to many Lankans. One reason is that there are no serious art critics in the Tamil language who can introduce him in English to other Sri Lankans. And the rest of the art critics on the island don't seem to care to know about the activities of Tamil speaking artists. This is not a healthy sign in a plural society like ours. I might add that the Sinhala cultural scene is adequately covered in the Tamil press. I don't think culture should be a one way traffic.

ROBINSON: Then please introduce us to A. Marku.

SIVAKUMARAN: Actually, his name is A. Mark. He signs his work A. Marku. In the Tamil way. He was born in 1933 in Jaffna — in Gurunagar, the fishing area I mentioned before! He's created more than 1000 paintings and sculptures. He's a modernist in style. He likes Gaughin, Roualt, Cezanne, Picasso. He likes to quote Gaughin. Go to nature. Study nature. Take nature's essence, then create. He first studied art in Jaffna under an artist named Benedict. An amus-

ing story is that he was also a student of a Jesuit priest — a general student, not an art student — Father Marcelline Jayakody, who used to teach at St. Patrick's College in Jaffna. He — Father Jayakody — writes lyrics in Sinhala — he's a Sinhalese — and he composes Oriental music. Well, Mark drew the priest's portrait, and the priest blessed him as an artist. Donald Ramanayeka told you something about David Paynter. Mark or Marku was a student of his too. At the Government College of Fine Arts. Mark himself used to teach at Hartley College in Point Pedro. Now he's the art teacher at Kokuvil Hindu College. Not too long ago he organized an exhibition of paintings by some of his students.

ROBINSON: What are the names at least of some of the other Tamil artists in Sri Lanka?

SIVAKUMARAN: Well, in the north, say, in the Jaffna area, there's Benedict; there are M. S. Kandiah, Ramani, S. Ponnampalam, others. In Colombo, Samy, Moraes, D. Raja Segar, Mrs. Satyendra.

ROBINSON: Do any of these artists live off their work as artists?

SIVAKUMARAN: Segar says that he does. He claims that he's earning a substantial sum of money every month from his paintings. He's a modernist too. He's self taught. That is, he didn't go to any art school. Actually he was in the field of accountancy but gave that up to be a full time painter. He told me some time ago that he'd been interested in photography and the plastic arts and used to read a lot about painting in encyclopedias. He adores the paintings of Leonardo da Vinci. He says he was also influenced by Vincent Manan Sela. He's a Filipino painter who's not widely known in this part of the world. Segar likes to do water colors and pen and wash collages. His work is rather exotic. It seems to appeal to foreigners. They're his main buyers. Incidentally, he sometimes does covers for books. For

example, S. Muralitharan's *Koodaikul Desam* (Nation in a Basket). This may be the first collection of Tamil poems written in Sri Lanka following the pattern of haiku, by the way.

ROBINSON: You say "exotic". What kinds of subjects does Segar work with?

SIVAKUMARAN: It's not only the subjects, of course. But in a recent exhibition at the Lionel Wendt, his fifth one man show, he showed paintings on the ill treatment of children, the abuse of child laborers, cruelty to animals, fruitless eroticism, the frustrations of prostitution. Poverty is a recurrent theme in his work. One of the pictures is about a bull taken for castration.

ROBINSON: This is not exactly my notion of exotic.

SIVAKUMARAN: By exotic I mean elements characteristic to this part of the world but unusual to westerners. The pictures speak for themselves.

ROBINSON: What is Segar like in person? How old is he, anyway?

SIVAKUMARAN: He's in his early thirties. He has a pleasant appearance. There's an outer cover of cheerfulness, but I feel a mood of sorrow. Of disenchantment. I asked him a direct personal question: Is it unrequited love? Maybe, he said. I didn't want to probe, so I left it at that.

ROBINSON: You said before that Segar goes along with Gaughin's idea of studying nature. Do you know how he approaches a painting?

SIVAKUMARAN: He says a painter should control his own painting and not the painting the painter, so he has a preconception of what to draw or paint. He doesn't totally depend on whatever form a painting may take in process. He says an artist's own individualistic style should be recognizable to a viewer even if the painting is not signed. In fact, some of his paintings do not include signatures. He

says he paints only when he has an urge to paint. He has to be in the right mood. He says if a painter improves his technique and concentrates on craftsmanship then creativity is lost. You ought to know that this is a representative attitude here.

ROBINSON: Apparently he has a formula for making money.

SIVAKUMARAN: Look, I don't want to give the wrong impression about Segar. I'd like to point out one other interesting thing about him. He doesn't try to sell everything he paints. For instance, he's done a water color of Lord Buddha which he does not want to sell. The spirit of the picture is personal to him, he says. He's also done paintings that he feels are unique to him that he doesn't sell to foreigners. Most of his buyers are foreigners, but he does not sell a painting he likes to a foreigner because, he says, then that painting would go out of the island.

ROBINSON: Going backward again, Rupavahini before reminded me of broadcasting. Are radio or TV scripts ever published in Sri Lanka as they sometimes are in the United States? Norman Corwin's, for example?

SIVAKUMARAN: Rarely. As you know from your own broadcasting experience, what goes on the airwaves is almost invariably gone with the wind. Broadcast scripts are seldom published. It's partly due to the ephemeral nature of the subject, it's partly due to the spoken language of the medium. But, yes, quite recently two former broadcasters here, S. K. Pararajasingham and N. Shanmugalingan, selected about twenty five scripts on a single theme — various aspects of Tamil culture in Sri Lanka — and collected them into a book entitled *Ithayaranjani*. Pleasing to the Heart. The scripts were originally broadcast over commercial radio, by the way. The book's an excellent handbook of some of the finer points of the

cultural traits of the local Tamil community.

ROBINSON: What kind of cultural traits are you referring to?

SIVAKUMARAN: Karagam jewellery, for example. Farmers' festivals.

Draupaddi Amman worship. Worship of Murugan or Krishnan or Kavadi. Omens. Cinema. Sarawathi Pooja. Folk cultural traits as depicted in ancient Tamil literature.

ROBINSON: Then how about something on the two collectors—Pararajasingham and Shanmugalingan?

SIVAKUMARAN: Well, Pararajasingham was a graduate in Carnatic music. He also studied science. He began his career as a teacher. Then he went into commercial broadcasting, starting as an announcer. He's a singer, and he announced with a cultivated melodic voice. He rose up to the position of music controller at the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation. He was also one of the pioneers of light classical Tamil music in this country. I mean music that is not intricate and complex like Carnatic music ragas melodies but semi-classical. Perhaps Pararajasingham's greatest contribution is his effort to crystallize a consciousness for indigenous creative music. As for Shanmugalingan, he's now a lecturer in sociology at the University of Jaffna. You see, we have quite a few versatile people here! He's a lyricist, a singer of light classical Tamil songs. He produced one musical program, *Kala Kuyil*, *The Cuckoo Bird of the Times*, that was widely acclaimed. He once functioned as an assistant director of an Indo-Lanka co-production film. Both he and Pararajasingham have songs on *Gangai Yarlai*, the first Sri Lankan light classical Tamil music disc. The name *Gangai Yarlai* is a combination of *gangai*, river — you know *Ganges*—and *yarl*, a musical instrument. An ancient musical instrument like a harp. It's not in use now. Swami Vipulananda the first professor of Tamil at the



University of Ceylon wrote a magnum opus on it. *Yarl Nool*. Now to continue. You may be especially interested in knowing that Shanmugalingan is also a writer of sorts. He recently produced an offbeat publication. A kind of elegy to his dead father. His father was a retired teacher, an important figure in the Myliddy South area in Tellipalai on the Jaffna Peninsula. And in this book — really a booklet — *En Appavin Kathai* (The Story of My Father) Shanmugalingan tries to give life to his father's past in an emotive poetic style. The booklet was published by his mother Naguleswari Nagalingam.

ROBINSON: Why do you say offbeat?

SIVAKUMARAN: It's customary among the Tamils to publish the life story of a deceased person in verse form. It's called Kalvettu. It's rather formal. In recent times the elegy has sometimes been expressed in fiction such as *Appiah* by S. Ponnadura and even in drama. *Appiah* is an endearing term for father. In Shanmugalingan's case, he writes in the first person as if he's talking with his father.

ROBINSON: Let's get into a broader subject. As a journalist who deals with all aspects of local culture, do you have any particular thoughts on the relationships among the various strata of culture? High brow, middle brow, low brow?

SIVAKUMARAN: "Culture" connotes many things to different people. High culture. Folk culture. Popular culture. Subculture. Yes, we have to have standards. Quite legitimately. But one cannot impose a uniform standard on all expressions of culture. The reality is that in Sri Lanka the so-called high culture is a bore for the majority of the aesthetically untrained masses. Sociologically untrained, too. On the other hand, the so-called popular culture here does not satisfy the more refined tastes of the few. There's a conflict of interests, so to speak. The sensible approach to this uneasiness is to evaluate

these respective “Cultures” in their own moulds. Aesthetic pluralism is inevitable. It’s one thing to condemn pretentious, half-baked, puerile, hotch-potch productions. It’s another thing to dismiss anything as culturally “untouchable” that appeals to wider sections of the people.

ROBINSON: Now I wasn’t just kidding about children’s literature before. Really, who are some of the local Tamil writers of children’s literature?

SIVAKUMARAN: Well, before we were discussing the publication of broadcast scripts. Coincidentally, a few years ago a collection of short stories by P. M. Puniyameen, a Sri Lanka Muslim who writes in Tamil, came out. The stories were originally broadcast in Tamil over the Muslim service of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation. *Nilalin Arumai*. The Usefulness of the Shadow. The stories as a whole describe aspects of the daily lives of Muslims — Moors — in the Kandy region, which you’ve visited. Most of the stories center about children themselves. Their behavior is contrasted with the behavior of adults. A couple of the stories show the situation of youngsters in search of motherly love. They lack it because their mothers have gone to the Middle East to earn a living. Puniyameen is still in his 20s. He graduated from the University of Peradeniya. He’s the head master of a school in the hill country. He’s also written a couple of other books.

Then, recently, Thimilai Thumilan, a teacher of Tamil at the Batticaloa Teachers Training College, published a collection of poems for children. Over fifty poems. A lot are on lambs and cows and crows and cuckoos — you know, that sort of thing. Some are on important writers in Tamil literature — Thiru Valluvar, Bharathi, Vipulanandar — and some are on Lord Buddha, Jesus,

the Prophet Mohammed, and Mahatma Gandhi. I think you can guess that these poems — shall we just say verses? — are basically meant to present moral values to children.

ROBINSON: Would you please briefly identify these Tamil writers?

SIVAKUMARAN: Briefly. Thiru Valluvar was a great Tamil poet of the 3rd century A. D. who composed Thirukural. This contains over 1300 couplets on ethical values, similar to the codes of Manu in North India. Subramania Bharathi — I think you know his name at least — is a great 20th century Tamil poet who fought for the independence of India. Vipulananda is a Sri Lankan swami from Karativu in the Batticaloa district. Belonging to the Ramakrishna mission, he was the first Tamil professor in the University of Ceylon. He produced a magnum opus on *Yar*, as I said before.

And, before you jump to the next topic, let me refer to Dr. S. Maunaguru. He teaches in the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Jaffna. He's interested in *koothu*, the Tamil folk plays we went into before, and he does research on the Sri Lankan Tamil drama tradition. He himself is a performing artist — a dancer and actor — and has written plays. *Sankaram* (Destruction). *Sari Pathi Malai* (Real Half Rains). *Nammaip Pidditha Pisasukal* (The Devils That Have Enslaved Us). Anyway, I know you're interested in theatre. But to the present point, Maunaguru recently published *Thappi Vantha Thadi Aadu* (The Lone Goat That Escaped), his two plays for children. These plays were originally performed a few years ago by the young students of St. John Bosco School in Jaffna. They were about nine or ten years old. Maunaguru used the *koothi* technique in writing and producing these two children's plays. He says that plays presented for children — and by children — should be presented without inhibition. He means a polished performance is

not so important. But the story should entertain children. Like games do, or sports. Makeup should be exaggerated. Facial expressions, too. Costumes should be bright.

ROBINSON: Let's jump again. Earlier you referred to R. Murugaiyan's edition of *Mallikai Kavithaikal*, poems published in the literary magazine "Mallikai" (Jasmine). Would you like to describe the poems in this anthology?

SIVAKUMARAN: Well, in general. The collection is fairly representative of the trends in poetry written in Tamil here. There are poems by 51 poets in all. Even so, not all the important Tamil poets in Sri Lanka are represented. For example, M. A. Nuhuman, who we discussed before, is not included because he had not published poetry in "Mallikai". One good thing about the anthology is that it contains poems with regional undertones and styles.

ROBINSON: What are regional undertones?

SIVAKUMARAN: I mean the Tamil language is being spoken by nearly one quarter of the people of Sri Lanka, and it has its own regional dialects, and many of them are reflected in this collection.

ROBINSON: Again in general, what are the subjects of these poems? Before you said the editor of "Mallikai" Dominic Jeeva is a communist, so may I presume most of the poems fall into the category of social realism?

SIVAKUMARAN: Yes, that's correct. The poems as a whole have direct relevance to contemporary life in this island. They are protest poems. Protest against exploitation and oppression. Against injustice and corruption and discrimination. They are poems in support of the working class in the sense that they express feelings that stress the power and glory of laborers. Some poems in the book praise the great achievements of humankind and encourage hope in

the capability of people to change society for the better.

ROBINSON: As long as we're on poetry again, can we go back to S.

Muralitharan's poems in the haiku form?

SIVAKUMARAN: *Koodaikul Desam*? No, they're not the same kind of poems. The book contains about seventy five three line statements. Statements of ideas. Really verse instead of poetry. Some of them are refreshng. Our tears are rain drops above the desert. Cigarette packets, little coffins at cheap price. Maybe that one's not so refreshing! Hey, who's there pouring milk into the river howling? But the book as a whole fails to form into a whole structure. But Muralitharan's still in his 20s, so he has time to develop. Incidentally, he's a student at the University of Peradeniya. In science.

ROBINSON: I'm glad you almost always give us some brief biographical information about all these people. Which reminds me of another question. Have you read any good biographies lately?

SIVAKUMARAN: Yes, of course. Don't forget I just referred to Shan-mugalingan's elegy to his dead father, *En Appavin Kathai*. But *Golden Bud* comes first to mind. A biography of our President Ramasinghe Premadasa. The writer is a Sri Lankan, a Malaylee born here, K. Rajappan. *Golden Bud*'s unusual because it's written in all three of the languages spoken in Lanka — Sinhala, Tamil and English. (Rajappan's wife is a Sri Lankan Tamil singer of light classical songs.) This in itself is laudable when you consider the compartmentalization that is delaying the evolvment of a single Sri Lankan identity. Briefly, the book traces the major events of Premadasa's political career. What may especially interest you is that Premadasa has written six novels. One of them was turned into a popular film. For your information, a few other politicians in the island have interests in literature and the arts — T. B. Ilangaratne,

Lakshman Jayakody, Tyrone Fernando, to name only three. Premadasa himself has been active in encouraging artistic enterprises here. The Tower Hall Project for one. Besides he's interested in sports, "poverty alleviation", and so on. Premadasa learned the rudiments of politics from A. E. Goonasinghe in the 20s and 30s. Rajappan stresses Premadasa's desire for ethnic harmony in our country.

Then, I mentioned S. M. Hanifa before, didn't I? He's an important scholar and publisher. He used to be a journalist too. He's worked for "Thinkaran," the Tamil literary journal I referred to before, and the *Ceylon Observer* and the *Daily News*. Like me, he was also a Tamil Duty Editor in the news division of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation. Well, P. M. Puniyameen — I mentioned him before also — recently published a biography of S. M. Hanifa which gives a good picture of his importance in the world of contemporary Tamil literature as the editor and publisher of the *Thamil Mantram*, a small publishing company. Since 1953, for example, Hanifa—he's a Sri Lankan Muslim, by the way — has put out more than thirty books. Literary studies. Religious works. He's a very religious man, I hear. Poetry, including folk poetry and children's poems. Novels. Short stories. Hanifa himself has had a biography published by the *Muslim Times*. A biography of A. O. M. Hussain, who was an attorney in Kandy. He died. He was reported to have awakened a remote Muslim hamlet in the central region. He was a reformer. The son of A. Omar Lebbe Hajiar. The biography is called *The Great Son*.

As for Dominic Jeeva again, who's been editor of "Mallikai" for over twenty years, a collection of biographical articles about him, *Mallikai Jeeva*, was published recently by a group of Tamil writers

in honor of his 60th birthday. There are twenty nine articles so I'll just mention the names of a couple of the writers. Neela Padmanaban. K. M. Gothandam. Maybe I'm repeating myself, but let me say that Jeeva is one of the best examples of the revolutionary effect the progressive writers movement of the 1950s and 60s had on Tamil writing, demanding the depiction in literature of the poor and oppressed as opposed to that of the socially privileged and traditionally high placed. This movement highlighted the social relevance of literature and insisted that the writer be an activist for social change. There were many debates, of course, and Jeeva — and K. Daniel — I mentioned him before too—who both came from underprivileged and socially oppressed castes, were able, because of their courage, to write about social inequalities from the inside, as it were. They wrote about their own sufferings.

Now, biography aside, let me tell you about Anthony Jeeva, too. Also a Sri Lankan Tamil and also born a Catholic. They haven't publicly renounced religion, but my guess is that they don't believe in a religious faith now. He — Anthony — is from the hill country. Dominic's from the north. Anyway, Anthony is a dramatist and freelance journalist. He's written a booklet called *Eelathil Thamil Nadagankal*. That's Tamil Drama in Sri Lanka. He also runs a small publishing house — almost all the publishing houses here are small—and he's started a literary magazine called "Kolunthu" that he edits himself. Kolunthu means budding tree leaves. It's a journal covering the hill country political, social and cultural scenes. As for biography, in the first issue of "Kolunthu" — it's a fairly new journal — C. V. Velupillai has a biographical article on Kothandarama Natesa Aiyar. Other articles deal with the cultural activities of SriLankans in India, especially Tamilnadu, with hill country Tamil

workers, with the history of the hill country and so on. There's also a piece on new poetry in Malaysia and a short story by Karuna Perera and a Bulgarian poem translated into Tamil by K. Ganesh. I told you about him before.

ROBINSON: Who is Kothandarama Natesa Aiyar?

SIVAKUMARAN: I was just coming to Aiyar because Anthony Jeeva has just published a biography of him by Saral Nadan. He was a brahmin from Tamilnadu, from Tanjavur, but he was a pioneer in the trade union movement in Sri Lanka. Aiyar had a tremendous impact on local politics, particularly in relation to tea plantation workers, for nearly thirty seven years until his death in 1947. Aiyar was the first to start a daily Tamil language newspaper in Sri Lanka. *Desa Nesan*. He initiated many extensive studies on our plantation workers, the real "wretched of the earth". He first came to Lanka in 1919. He saw for himself the pitiable conditions of plantation workers under European estate owners. He came back in 1920 and started *Desa Nesan*. He began to take an active part in trade union activities and in politics. Like Ranasinghe Premadasa, he came into contact with A. E. Goonesinghe.

Aiyar learned that Sri Lankan born Tamils looked down on these Tamil "coolies" of Indian origin and that the Sinhalese hated them and that the European owners — British and Dutch mostly — treated them as slaves. Let me say that there were about 150 Indians who owned estates in Sri Lanka at that time. The 20s and 30s. They were against Aiyar too for fighting for the rights of estate workers. As you know, the world wide economic depression resulted in large scale unemployment in Sri Lanka. It may interest you that Aiyar was a novelist too. That is, he wrote at least one novel. *Moolayil Kunthiya Muthiyon Allathu Thupparium Thiran*.



That's a mouthful for you, isn't it? In English, Moolayil Kunthiya Muthiyon translates as The Aged Person Squatting in the Corner. Allathu is "or". Thupparium Thiran, the ability to detect, or cleverness in detection.

ROBINSON: Then, briefly, and finally, who is Saral Nadan?

SIVAKUMARAN: He's an important hill country writer. He's the manager of a tea estate, actually, but he's published poetry, fiction, criticism, and non-fiction, as in this case. Another of Nadan's biographies, as long as we're on that subject, is one of Cannapan Velsingam Vellupillai, who wrote the article on Aiyar in the first issue of "Kolunthu". He — Vellupillai — was a humanist writer who loved hill country folk lore and folk songs. He was among the first to spotlight the plight of the estate people in his writings in English. He also wrote in Tamil, of course. He was once a member of Parliament here and he was a trade unionist. He was married to a Sinhalese woman. As you should know by now, intercommunal marriage is very common in Sri Lanka. Vellupillai edited a trade union periodical called "Maveli" and sometimes included articles on literature and the arts. He died over five years ago. In fact, one of Vellupillai's novels has a trade unionist as its protagonist.

ROBINSON: Was it written in English? What's its name?

SIVAKUMARAN: No, it's in Tamil. *Ini Pada Maataen*. I Won't Bear It Any Longer.

ROBINSON: What was the name of that Hollywood movie about fifteen years ago or so in which city people cry out "No, no we won't take it anymore!"? Do you think Vellupillai got his title from that?

SIVAKUMARAN: It's possible, but I doubt it. In any case, the novel is set in the Tamil speaking hill country. It covers two or three decades. Vellupillai describes the frequent ethnic violence in the

plantation sector, the plight of refugees. The narrator — he's the protagonist — advises the hill country Tamils to fight for their rights in a constructive way. He tells his son to design houses for the displaced plantation workers. Vellupillai implicitly affirms the idea of a Sri Lankan identity. It's a constructive theme. The style is direct and simple. It's a realistic novel. It reflects regional cadences. And it's well structured.